

["Small Town Doctor"]

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CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA. LIFE HISTORY.

TITLE: SMALL TOWN DOCTOR"

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Name of Person Interviewed L. M. Mitchell, M. D.

Place Batesburg, S. C.

Occupation Medical Doctor, Surgeon

Fictitious Name Dr. Cameron

Name of Writer F. Donald Atwell

Name of Reviser State Office.

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He maintains a musty, ethery little office right next to Williams Livery Stable on a back street at home. Two ratty chairs and an ancient golden oak table are the only furnishings of the reception room - a bare walled cavern with a damp cement floor. An unbleached muslin curtain, fly-specked and gummy with age, serves as a partition between the

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reception room and the inner sanctum. The latter, a mere cubby-hole with swaying shelves holding dust covered bottles. A human skull on a sagging shelf in the rear grins at you as you enter.

Behind a scarred desk of ancient vintage, piled high with books, medicinal samples, and huge jars of alcohol containing everything from a two-months foetus to an enlarged appendix, sits a dried up specimen more gruesome looking than anything preserved in alcohol. His face is pinched and haggard, and his nappy clothes reek of pills, ether, and stale tobacco.

He rises unsteadily as I approach. His entire bearing is that of an old man who has lain in a dust covered casket for years.

"You will pardon Doctor a moment?" his voice rasps, "Must call on Charlie and get a half-pint. Don't have fifty cents on you by chance, have you minter?"

He doesn't even recognize me. Yet, it has been a long time. I extend the coin, and his bony, claw-like hand closes over it greedily. "Just make yourself comfortable, Doctor will be back presently."

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He shuffles out, blinking at the sunlight in the front office like a rat coming out of its dark hide-out. He is all that is left of what was once Batesburg's leading Physician and surgeon.

His life story starts twenty years ago in Batesburg, S. C. It is a small town of some twenty-five hundred population, with neat homes, a conventional Main Street, and a "mill hill" - the latter, a village in its own right.

A small boy rushes into Johnson's Drug Store on the corner of Main for an ice-cream, only to find himself in the midst of a heated argument between a dressed up individual and the druggist.

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"By God! Johnson, you mean to tell me you'll set up a bunch of fops to sodas and yet won't fill that prescription for old man Hartley. I can't believe it!"

Dr. Johnson, the druggist, a wizened little man with the beady eyes of a snake, snarls back, "Listen here, Cameron, I'm in the drug business to make money. If I fill prescriptions for every sorry no count Tom, Dick, and Harry in this town, why, I'd go busted, just like you're going doctoring everybody for nothing!"

The nice looking man with the anger in his eyes, snatches his little black bag and whirls about to leave the store. "Fill that prescription!" He plunks a bill on the fountain counter and leaves.

That was my first encounter with the new doctor from "up North" who had chosen to cast his lot with us small-town folks. And did the town hum with gossip about Dr. Cameron! Forty-five, they said, an eligible bachelor, and handsome in the bargain.

I saw the new doctor again for the second time at the graduation exercises in the Grammar School auditorium. He was a grand looking man with a high forehead, coal black hair, and eyes that stared everyone out of countenance. With him that night was Miss Alice Beery, my fifth grade teacher. Miss Beery had long ago become a legend in our town. She was thirty or better, but she was still sweet and winsome and pretty. She didn't look like an old maid to me. Half the boys in school dreamed of growing up, becoming president, and making Miss Alice first lady of the land.

"Doc" must have had a similar idea, because he chose her out of all the women in town. I watched closely when she laid her head on his shoulder, not minding the people around her, and I knew that after all these years Miss Beery's knight had come. Even if he didn't arrive on a dashing white charger, at least he came riding. His Model T. Ford was a familiar sight in town. The auditorium buzzed when Miss Alice rested her head on her man's shoulder, while he stared the gossip-mongers down.

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It soon became apparent that people didn't die if "Doc" Cameron attended them. A saying sprung up around town that when Doc stepped in, Death stepped out!

It became his slogan.

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One morning in the seventh grade arithmetic room, I was taken ill. My heart began to pump heavily, and my face started burning up. I got weak as a kitten. Miss Beery looked at me sharply, and said, "Donald, you may go home now, if you like."

When I reached home I was one sick boy. My mother rushed to the telephone to call Dr. Thomas, better known to us boys as "Old Sawbones." He was a tall, lanky, sour-faced man who always reminded me of how I thought an undertaker should look! He certainly had the funeral manner.

"Naw you don't Ma!" I hollered at her, "I want that new doctor!"

"But Donald, we've had Dr. Thomas ever since ."

"I don't care! I want Doc Cameron, I'm sick, and I might die, and then you'd be sorry you didn't get the doctor I wanted."

It worked. I heard my mother fairly scream over the phone to the operator.

"Mabel!" Mabel was 'Central' in those days, and knew everyone in town. "Mabel, ring Dr. Cameron's office - hurry! Donald came home a moment ago from school deathly ill. Oh, please hurry, please!"

It was only a matter of minutes before the familiar rattle of Doc's Model T. sounded out front. It choked down, coughed, there came the sound of a door being slammed. Doc rushed into the room and up to my bed.

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"By God! I thought somebody was dying here, judging from the way Mabel carried on over the phone." He stuck his hand out and grinned, "hiah son, I'm Doc Cameron. We're going to be friends.... the very best of friends, aren't we, my boy?" I took his hand, and he added, "here, open your trap." I became, at that moment, Doc's friend for life. While he was taking my temperature he turned to my mother.

"Got any whiskey in the house, Madam?"

"But surely, Doctor, you're not going to give the child whiskey?"

"Hells Bells No, Madam! The whiskey's for me!" I knew Mother regretted calling Doc Cameron. But it wasn't but a few minutes before he had her smiling back at him. Doc was that way. I learned later that he took Mother aside and informed her in no uncertain terms that she had a serious case of typhoid fever on her hands, and that careful treatment was the only thing that would pull me through. Even today, I have faint recollections of his kindly face bending over me in the night.

I learned later that he had stayed up three nights straight with me. He wouldn't go home. They told as he had said: "I'm not losing this boy. I'll pull him through some way till midnight, and his fever will break. It's the crisis. He'll be O. K. then."

My mother, worried to death, had tried to get him to lie down and rest, but he wouldn't leave my bedside even for a moment. "Must watch every small development" he had said.

He cancelled all calls except emergency ones. And, he didn't have any of those kind while he was attending me in the most serious illness I had known. One call was persistent, but he had "cussed out" the party doing the callings and lost a patient. "Pampered Mrs. Jones, always imagining there's something wrong with herself!" Doc had snorted. "Ought to give her a dose of strychnine for calling like this."

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"Doc" never called, and then sat down to be waited on. If he wanted anything in the kitchen or bathroom, he went in for it himself, and if he couldn't find it, he asked somebody to get it for him. If he happened in at meal time, and he would often drop in to see how we were, he'd sit down, start eating and talk up a storm.

"That dammed Thomas, nearly killed a woman today. Nearly dead when they called me. I found her swelled up bigger'n a balloon. Thomas gave her a hypo to ease her. Can you imagine! If I'd been ten minutes longer, why she'd been dead. Thomas oughta be a horse doctor. No, he'd kill the poor horse!"

Soon the news spread around town that he had married Miss Beery.

We boys had a grand time serenading the couple when they returned from a two-weeks honeymoon. We got hold of some old mill saws, and beat on them with axes. You could have heard them ten miles. It sort of compensated for the loss of Miss Alice.

I shall never forget how "Doc" looked when he stuck his head out of an upstairs window. A lot of cars had backed in the ditch in front of the house, and turned their headlights on.

He laughed and waved. His pretty bride joined him at the window, and her eyes sparkled in the glare of the headlights.

After that "Doc" just became more popular than ever. He was elected mayor, chairman of the Medical Society, a member of every major delegation.

With the suddenness of lightning, the storm broke around "Doc's" head. It seemed that some poor devil had come in the night begging dope. He was really an ill man, and was trying to get to a hospital in Columbia. "Doe" gave him a shot, a little to ease him on the way, and his railroad fare.

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Every doctor in town - and there were three - set up a wail. Doctor Cameron was asked to resign from the county medical association. Then the American Medical Association fired him for giving that man dope to carry with him. But "Doc" didn't seem to mind. He laughed at them all, and his patients seemed to increase. He still had a fine office up over the First National Bank. His wife 8 stuck by him.

But people he had helped turned against him. There were sinister whisperings about unethical practices of all kinds. Ridiculous charges that were accepted greedily by those he had helped most. My mother took up for him. She told them gossip mongers that they had better shut up about the finest doctor that had ever come to our town. Mother scored old lady Jones at the Missionary meeting one afternoon. She told her to pay "Doc" what she owed him, and then "run him down".

Doc and Miss Beery kept right on like they always had. Miss Beery continued to sing in the Methodist Church Choir. "Doc" would just sit in the front of the congregation and grin up at her. He always slept through the sermons. Old Mr. Mahaffey would always slam the Bible shut loud enough to wake up the dead, much less Doc. It was the signal that the sermon was coming to a close.

The women of the church were going on some kind of trip as delegates to a convention and Doc's wife went along. She drove her own car. But she never drove it back. A drunk hit her head on just outside of Allendale. The women riding with her were seriously injured but she was the only one, strangely enough, who succumbed to her injuries.

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It was the last straw. I remember how hushed everything was in town the night they brought her back. I had started to the Broadway Movie Palace up-town, but changed my mind and crossed over to Johnson's Drug Store. "Doc was sitting at one of the tables with his head in his hands. He didn't look up when I entered. Dr. Johnson came over to

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him and placed his arm about Doc's shoulders. For the first time in my life, I saw a gentle expression on the druggist's face.

"Cameron," he said, in a husky tone, "I've never particularly liked you - you know that. But tonight there's not a man in this town who feels your misfortune more than I do at this moment. If there is anything I can do, please feel free to call on me."

Doc collapsed at the graveside. Two friends lifted and carried him to a waiting automobile. It was at this time that we moved to Columbia.

I heard from "Doc" through friends from time to time. It seemed that after his wife died, he lacked the support and strength necessary to hold his own. He became slouchy in his appearance. He snarled back at those who accused him unjustly. He drank heavily. Later, came Morphine.

His downfall was swift and final after his wife's death. "Doc" was becoming an old man, an old man unable to fight back.